

Trends and Regional Disparities in School Education in India

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Abstract

India has achieved substantial expansion in school participation, teacher availability and educational infrastructure, yet national averages conceal pronounced differences in progression, learning and school resources across States and Union Territories. This study examines recent trends and regional disparities in Indian school education using secondary data from UDISE+ 2025–26, NITI Aayog's decadal analysis of UDISE+ data for 2014–15 to 2024–25, and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024. The latest administrative data cover approximately 14.67 lakh schools, 24.72 crore students and 1.03 crore teachers. The analysis shows that the central challenge in Indian schooling is increasingly shifting from initial access to continued participation beyond the elementary stage, foundational learning, and equitable access to educational resources. Higher-secondary participation improved considerably during the last decade, but large interstate gaps persist. In 2024–25, secondary Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) ranged from 110.1 per cent in Chandigarh to 51.1 per cent in Bihar, while higher-secondary GER ranged from 107.4 per cent in Chandigarh to 38.1 per cent in Bihar. Transition from secondary to higher secondary ranged from 100 per cent in Delhi and Chandigarh to 47.8 per cent in Meghalaya. Digital infrastructure is similarly unequal: computer facilities were available in 100 per cent of schools in Lakshadweep but only 19.7 per cent in Meghalaya. Rural learning indicators recovered substantially after the pandemic, but ASER 2024 shows that foundational competencies remain uneven and incomplete. The findings suggest that India requires geographically differentiated interventions concentrating on secondary-stage retention, foundational learning, digital and physical infrastructure, and the intersection of regional and socioeconomic disadvantage.

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Introduction

India operates one of the world's largest school systems. According to UDISE+ 2025–26, approximately 24.72 crore students are enrolled across 14.67 lakh schools and are served by about 1.03 crore teachers. The latest data also show substantial improvement in school infrastructure: 95 per cent of schools have electricity, 99.5 per cent have drinking-water facilities, 98.5 per cent have girls' toilets, 69.9 per cent have computers and 67.4 per cent have internet connectivity. These aggregate indicators reflect a school system that has moved considerably beyond the earlier problem of basic institutional access.

Expansion, however, has not produced spatially uniform educational opportunities. NITI Aayog's 2026 analysis of UDISE+ data shows that the structure of participation changes sharply as children move from elementary to secondary and higher-secondary education. Higher-secondary GER increased from 46.37 per cent in 2014–15 to 58.4 per cent in 2024–25, yet the variation among states remained exceptionally large. Furthermore, the national transition rate from upper primary to secondary declined from 91.58 per cent in 2014–15 to 86.6 per cent in 2024–25, indicating that universalisation of early schooling has not been fully translated into uninterrupted educational progression.

The issue is therefore no longer adequately described simply as a shortage of schools or low enrolment. Access, continuation, learning, infrastructure and socioeconomic circumstances interact differently across regions. A state can have relatively high enrolment and nevertheless experience weak learning outcomes; another can have good digital connectivity but poor secondary retention. Consequently, evaluating educational development only through a single national average can obscure the geography of educational disadvantage.

The present study examines these differences by combining the latest administrative statistics with household-based learning evidence. It treats regional disparity primarily as variation across States and Union Territories and investigates how this variation changes across educational stages.

The study has four objectives: to examine the major trends in school participation and progression in India; to measure the scale of interstate disparities in enrolment, transition and infrastructure; to evaluate recent trends and spatial differences in foundational learning; and to identify the principal policy priorities emerging from the combined evidence on access, continuity, learning and equity.

Correspondingly, the study addresses four research questions. First, how has school participation in India changed during the last decade? Second, at which educational stages are interstate disparities most pronounced? Third, how far do improvements in physical and digital infrastructure coincide with improvements in participation and learning? Fourth, what forms of geographically differentiated intervention are required to reduce the remaining gaps in Indian school education?

Review of Literature

Research on educational inequality in India increasingly demonstrates that the expansion of schooling does not automatically eliminate differences associated with geography, socioeconomic status or social identity. Varughese and Bairagya (2020), using several rounds of National Sample Survey data, found persistent differences in educational attainment by

gender, residence and social group despite successive national policy interventions. Importantly, the magnitude of these inequalities varies across states, which means that a uniform national policy environment can coexist with geographically different educational outcomes.

Spatial inequality is also associated with the geographical provision of public schools. Bailwal and Paul (2021) found that rural villages with higher proportions of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations had a lower probability of public-school provision. Although expansion under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan reduced disparities in primary-school availability, inequalities were more persistent at the secondary stage. Their findings link spatial distribution of educational institutions with wider differences in educational outcomes.

Inequality begins before formal primary education. Choudhury, Joshi and Kumar (2023), using National Statistical Office data, identified significant rural–urban and socioeconomic differences in access to pre-primary education. Household economic conditions and the educational level of the household head explained an important part of the access gap, with disadvantaged social groups particularly affected in rural areas.

Gender disadvantage also interacts with poverty and geography. Mitra, Mishra and Abhay (2023), analysing 117,115 children aged 5–17 from NSS 2017–18, reported that girls were more likely than boys to be out of school and that urban children had substantially lower odds of being out of school than rural children. Their spatial analysis identified concentrations of vulnerability in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat, with poor Scheduled Tribe girls among the particularly vulnerable combinations. These results describe the 2017–18 population rather than the current situation, but they demonstrate the importance of examining overlapping forms of disadvantage rather than gender or region independently.

Evidence on adolescent dropout similarly highlights household and social mechanisms. Kumar et al. (2023), using longitudinal UDAYA data from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, found a strong relationship between dropout and household wealth, maternal education, paid work and gender-related discrimination. Their results are geographically specific to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and should not be generalised to all of India, but they provide important evidence on mechanisms through which regional socioeconomic conditions can affect educational continuation.

Learning-outcome comparisons require additional methodological caution. Johnson and Parrado (2021) found substantial differences between alternative Indian learning-assessment datasets and concluded that ASER is more appropriate for comparing state averages in a single year than for fine-grained district rankings or interpreting small year-to-year changes. This consideration informs the use of ASER in the present study: state contrasts and broad national trends are emphasised rather than precise district-level rankings.

Data and Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and comparative secondary-data design. Four categories of evidence are combined.

The principal contemporary source is UDISE+ 2025–26, released by the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education. It provides the latest national picture of schools, enrolment, teachers, retention, transition and infrastructure. UDISE+ 2025–26 is reported under the reorganised NEP structure as well as the existing school structure. To prevent non-comparable indicators from being combined, the current NEP-structure figures are used

primarily to describe the 2025–26 national situation, while historical and state comparisons rely principally on the harmonised 2014–15 to 2024–25 series compiled by NITI Aayog.

The second source is NITI Aayog's *School Education System in India: Temporal Analysis and Policy Roadmap for Quality Enhancement*, published in May 2026. The report analyses UDISE/UDISE+ indicators over the decade 2014–15 to 2024–25 and permits consistent comparisons among states.

The third source is ASER 2024. It is a rural household survey covering 649,491 children across 17,997 villages in 605 rural districts. Its one-to-one assessments provide evidence on elementary reading and arithmetic that is complementary to administrative enrolment statistics. Since ASER represents rural India rather than the entire school population, its estimates are treated specifically as rural learning indicators.

Percentage-point change is used for temporal comparison, while the maximum-minus-minimum range is used to demonstrate the magnitude of interstate inequality for selected indicators. These statistics are descriptive and are not interpreted as causal effects. GER also requires careful interpretation: values above 100 per cent are possible because students outside the official age group can be enrolled at a particular stage. Consequently, a GER above 100 should not be interpreted as evidence that more than 100 per cent of the eligible population has been served.

Results and Analysis

Expansion of the School System and Changing Nature of the Access Problem

The latest UDISE+ release records 14.67 lakh schools, 24.72 crore students and approximately 1.03 crore teachers in 2025–26. The national pupil–teacher ratio under the NEP stages is 10 at the foundational stage, 12 at the preparatory stage, 17 at the middle stage and 21 at the secondary stage. These national ratios indicate that the aggregate supply of teachers is no longer the only binding educational constraint.

The more important difficulty appears further along the educational pathway. Under the NEP structure, retention in 2025–26 was 98.5 per cent at the foundational stage, 91.1 per cent at the preparatory stage and 83.7 per cent at the middle stage, but only 51.9 per cent through the secondary stage. Thus, roughly half of the cohort represented in the retention calculation persists through the full school cycle covered by the secondary stage.

A decade-long comparison reinforces this interpretation.

Indicator	2014–15	2024–25	Change
Higher-secondary GER (%)	46.37	58.4	+12.03 pp
Upper-primary → secondary transition (%)	91.58	86.6	–4.98 pp
Secondary → higher-secondary transition (%)	67.7	75.1	+7.4 pp
Girls' higher-secondary GER (%)	45.99	60.9	+14.91 pp
SC higher-secondary GER (%)	48.29	59.4	+11.11 pp
ST higher-secondary GER (%)	34.07	51.9	+17.83 pp

Source: Calculated from NITI Aayog (2026), based on UDISE/UDISE+.

The data reveal two simultaneous developments. Participation in higher-secondary education has increased substantially, particularly among girls and Scheduled Tribe students, but progression after Grade 8 remains problematic. The fall in the upper-primary-to-secondary transition rate from 91.58 to 86.6 per cent is especially important because it demonstrates that gains at the elementary stage have not automatically produced universal secondary participation.

Interstate Differences in Secondary and Higher-Secondary Participation

Regional disparity becomes particularly visible at secondary level. In 2024–25, secondary GER reached 110.1 per cent in Chandigarh, 107.5 per cent in Goa, 104.9 per cent in Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, 102.6 per cent in Himachal Pradesh and 101.3 per cent in Karnataka. At the other end, Bihar recorded only 51.1 per cent, followed by Nagaland at 61.8 per cent, Uttar Pradesh at 64.3 per cent, Jammu and Kashmir at 66.1 per cent and Madhya Pradesh at 68.2 per cent. The Chandigarh–Bihar difference was therefore 59 percentage points.

The disparity becomes even larger at higher secondary. National GER rose from 46.37 per cent in 2014–15 to 58.4 per cent in 2024–25, but Chandigarh recorded 107.4 per cent while Bihar remained at 38.1 per cent. The resulting difference of approximately 69.3 percentage points indicates that later-stage schooling is one of the most spatially unequal components of Indian school education.

Selected measures illustrate the magnitude of the divide:

Indicator, 2024–25/2024	Higher value	Lower value	Difference
Secondary GER	Chandigarh: 110.1%	Bihar: 51.1%	59.0 pp
Higher-secondary GER	Chandigarh: 107.4%	Bihar: 38.1%	69.3 pp
Secondary → higher-secondary transition	Delhi/Chandigarh: 100%	Meghalaya: 47.8%	52.2 pp
Schools with computer facility	Lakshadweep: 100%	Meghalaya: 19.7%	80.3 pp
Functional electricity in schools	Several States/UTs: 100%	Meghalaya: 28.1%	71.9 pp
Govt. school Std V children reading Std II text, rural	Himachal Pradesh: 70.1%	Jammu & Kashmir: 21.8%	48.3 pp

Sources: NITI Aayog (2026); ASER 2024. GER values above 100 reflect enrolment of children outside the official age group and related demographic/mobility effects and should not be read as literal coverage above 100 per cent.

The particularly large variation in the transition from Grade 10 to Grade 11 is significant. The rate reached 100 per cent in Delhi and Chandigarh and exceeded 90 per cent in several smaller States and Union Territories. In contrast, Meghalaya recorded 47.8 per cent, West Bengal 57.4 per cent, Mizoram 58.5 per cent, Arunachal Pradesh 60.7 per cent and Assam 61.4 per cent. Thus, spatial inequality is generated not simply by children's entry into school but by the probability of continuing after important institutional transition points.

A Distinct Geography of Digital and Physical Infrastructure

India has made rapid aggregate progress in school infrastructure. By 2025–26, 95 per cent of schools had electricity, 99.5 per cent drinking water, 98.5 per cent girls' toilets, 96.9 per cent

handwashing facilities and 90.5 per cent libraries. Computer availability reached 69.9 per cent and internet availability 67.4 per cent.

National averages, however, conceal an unusually large digital divide. In 2024–25, computer facilities ranged from 100 per cent of schools in Lakshadweep and approximately 99.5–99.9 per cent in Delhi, Puducherry, Chandigarh and Kerala to only 19.7 per cent in Meghalaya, 25.1 per cent in West Bengal and 25.2 per cent in Bihar.

Internet availability exhibits a similarly complex geography. Gujarat reported 96.5 per cent, Goa 93.2 per cent, Kerala 91.7 per cent and Punjab 88.9 per cent, while West Bengal recorded only 18.6 per cent, Meghalaya 26.4 per cent, Arunachal Pradesh 33.6 per cent and Manipur 36.6 per cent. Bihar, however, increased from only 1.3 per cent in 2014–15 to 84.8 per cent in 2024–25, demonstrating that infrastructure disadvantage is not necessarily permanent and can change rapidly where investment expands.

Infrastructure gaps do not perfectly correspond with conventional economic geography. Karnataka, despite containing a major information-technology centre, had internet connectivity in only 50.7 per cent of its schools in 2024–25. Similarly, a state may achieve high internet coverage but continue to experience problems of participation or foundational learning. This implies that digital connectivity should be treated as an enabling resource rather than as a direct measure of educational quality.

Physical infrastructure also remains regionally unequal. Functional electricity was universal in a number of States and Union Territories in 2024–25, but stood at only 28.1 per cent in Meghalaya, 62.3 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh and 63.3 per cent in Manipur. The evidence therefore indicates a persistent infrastructure disadvantage concentrated particularly in parts of the North-East, even as some northeastern states perform strongly on selected learning measures.

Learning Outcomes: Recovery Without Universal Foundational Competence

School participation cannot be equated with learning. ASER 2024 found that enrolment among rural children aged 6–14 remained extremely high at 98.1 per cent, compared with 98.4 per cent in 2022. The proportion enrolled in government schools fell from the pandemic-era level of 72.9 per cent in 2022 to 66.8 per cent in 2024, close to the 65.6 per cent observed in 2018.

Learning outcomes improved strongly after the pandemic disruption. Among Std III children in government schools, the share able to read a Std II-level text increased from 16.3 per cent in 2022 to 23.4 per cent in 2024. Among Std V government-school children, the corresponding reading proportion increased from 38.5 to 44.8 per cent. Arithmetic improvement was also substantial: 33.7 per cent of all rural Std III children could perform at least a subtraction problem in 2024 compared with 25.9 per cent in 2022, while the government-school proportion increased from 20.2 to 27.6 per cent.

The recovery is meaningful but should not obscure the absolute levels. Fewer than half of Std V government-school pupils in rural India could read a Std II-level text, and fewer than three in ten Std III government-school pupils could complete the ASER subtraction task. Improvement from a pandemic-related low therefore does not imply the disappearance of foundational-learning deficits.

Interstate variation is equally important. In 2024, 70.1 per cent of rural government-school Std V children in Himachal Pradesh could read a Std II text, followed by Punjab at 66.0 per cent and Mizoram at 65.9 per cent. Jammu and Kashmir stood at 21.8 per cent, Nagaland at 27.1

per cent and Telangana at 29.3 per cent. The difference between Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir alone was 48.3 percentage points.

These findings demonstrate that neither geographical location nor economic development produces a simple educational hierarchy. Mizoram, for example, performs strongly on several rural learning measures despite the North-East's broader infrastructure constraints, while some economically stronger states perform less impressively on particular foundational indicators. Regional education policy therefore needs multidimensional diagnosis rather than classification based solely on state income or school enrolment.

Gender and Social-Group Disparities

Gender participation has improved considerably. In UDISE+ 2025–26, girls represented 48.4 per cent of total enrolment, while women accounted for 54.9 per cent of teachers. At the national level, the gender composition of formal school participation is therefore substantially more balanced than in earlier periods.

The decadal trend at higher secondary level is particularly noteworthy. Girls' GER increased from 45.99 per cent in 2014–15 to 60.9 per cent in 2024–25. Nevertheless, the state pattern remained highly uneven: Bihar recorded a girls' higher-secondary GER of 40.4 per cent, Nagaland 43.4 per cent, Arunachal Pradesh 45.8 per cent, Meghalaya 46.5 per cent and Madhya Pradesh 46.9 per cent in 2024–25.

ASER provides another perspective. Among rural 15–16-year-olds, the overall proportion not enrolled in school was 7.9 per cent in 2024. For girls it was 8.1 per cent, but the rate exceeded 10 per cent in Madhya Pradesh (16.1 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (15.0 per cent), Rajasthan (12.7 per cent), Mizoram (12.2 per cent), Gujarat (10.5 per cent) and Chhattisgarh (10.0 per cent). Aggregate gender parity therefore coexists with geographically concentrated pockets of female educational exclusion.

Social-group participation also improves at different rates. Between 2014–15 and 2024–25, higher-secondary GER increased from 48.29 to 59.4 per cent for Scheduled Caste students and from 34.07 to 51.9 per cent for Scheduled Tribe students. The greater increase for ST students is encouraging, but their 2024–25 participation remained below the national higher-secondary GER of 58.4 per cent.

The evidence consequently suggests that inequality is increasingly intersectional. A national gender average can appear favourable while rural girls in particular states remain disproportionately excluded; similarly, rising ST participation nationally can coexist with severe difficulties in remote settlements. Policy assessment therefore needs to move below national gender and social-group averages.

Discussion

Three broad conclusions emerge from the analysis.

First, the primary educational challenge in India has shifted from initial school entry towards educational continuity and learning. Near-universal rural enrolment among 6–14-year-olds and widespread basic school infrastructure represent significant achievements. Yet enrolment becomes progressively weaker at secondary and particularly higher-secondary stages. The 52.2 percentage-point gap between the highest and lowest state/UT transition rates from secondary to higher secondary demonstrates the scale of this continuation problem.

Second, educational geography in India is multidimensional. Bihar faces especially low secondary and higher-secondary participation. Parts of the North-East combine significant infrastructure deficits with varying educational outcomes. Meghalaya, for example, has particularly low electricity and computer availability and a low transition rate from secondary to higher secondary, while Mizoram performs strongly on selected ASER reading indicators. Karnataka combines high secondary GER with a much weaker transition into higher secondary. These cases demonstrate that a single “developed versus backward states” framework is analytically inadequate.

Third, improvements in inputs and improvements in outcomes are not equivalent. India has rapidly expanded electricity, computers and internet connectivity, but substantial foundational-learning gaps remain. Digital infrastructure can support learning only when accompanied by functioning devices, trained teachers, appropriate pedagogy, learning material, regular attendance and effective academic support.

The evidence is therefore consistent with a transition from an access-centred education problem towards an access–continuity–learning problem. India has largely created the institutional framework needed for widespread elementary schooling; the next stage requires ensuring that a child entering school acquires foundational competencies and remains in education through secondary and higher-secondary levels irrespective of state, district, sex or social background.

Policy Implications

A differentiated rather than uniform strategy is necessary. States with low secondary GER and weak Grade 8-to-9 transition, including Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, require expansion of accessible secondary capacity together with transport, scholarships, residential support and systematic tracking of children who fail to make the transition. In contrast, states where secondary participation is relatively high but Grade 10-to-11 transition is weak need greater attention to higher-secondary availability, subject streams, career counselling and the direct and opportunity costs of continued schooling.

Foundational learning should remain a central priority even where enrolment is nearly universal. State-level diagnostic assessments can be used to identify broad learning deficits, followed by competency-based instruction, structured remedial programmes and teacher support. The purpose should be instructional improvement rather than high-stakes state ranking, particularly because assessment evidence has known comparability limitations.

Digital policy should move from measuring connectivity alone to measuring meaningful educational use. Electricity, a functioning device, internet connectivity, suitable digital content and teacher capability form a complementary package. An internet connection in the absence of computers or reliable electricity cannot provide the same educational opportunity as a fully functional digital learning environment.

Geographically and socially targeted retention measures are also required. Transport support for students in remote areas, hostels where settlement patterns make daily travel impractical, targeted financial assistance, functioning toilets and menstrual-hygiene facilities, and stronger school-to-household engagement can reduce barriers that intensify during adolescence. Such measures are especially relevant where gender, tribal location, rurality and poverty overlap.

Finally, educational data systems should preserve comparable time series while improving student-level tracking. The transition to individual student records can improve the measurement of movement, retention and dropout, but methodological changes can also create apparent year-to-year shifts. Administrative publications should therefore clearly distinguish

genuine educational change from changes produced by improved identification and data architecture.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. UDISE+ is an administrative database and primarily measures participation, institutional resources and school-reported characteristics; it does not independently establish the quality or effective utilisation of all facilities. ASER is a household survey limited to rural areas, and its results should not be interpreted as estimates for all urban and rural children combined.

The study is descriptive. Interstate associations between infrastructure, enrolment and learning cannot be interpreted causally. Population structure, migration, age-grade mismatch, school management type, household income and numerous policy differences can affect the indicators simultaneously.

GER requires particular caution because it may exceed 100 per cent when over-age or under-age students are enrolled. Similarly, UDISE+ has progressively moved towards individual student records, increasing data precision but reducing the validity of mechanically interpreting large changes across years as genuine behavioural change. For this reason, the paper emphasises broad trends and harmonised comparisons rather than small annual fluctuations.

Conclusion

India has made substantial progress in expanding school access, teacher availability, gender participation and educational infrastructure. The national school system now encompasses almost a quarter of a billion students, and basic facilities have become widespread. Higher-secondary participation has also increased considerably over the past decade.

Nevertheless, the geography of educational opportunity remains highly unequal. Differences of around 59 percentage points in secondary GER, 69 percentage points in higher-secondary GER and more than 52 percentage points in transition from secondary to higher secondary reveal that a child's location continues to influence the probability of remaining in school. Digital-resource disparities are even larger. At the same time, ASER evidence shows a strong recovery in rural learning after 2022 without indicating universal acquisition of foundational competencies.

The central policy implication is that India cannot rely solely on national averages or on further expansion of physical access. The next phase of school-education policy must integrate continuity, foundational learning, infrastructure functionality and spatial equity. Different states face different bottlenecks, and within states the most disadvantaged children frequently experience several constraints simultaneously. A geographically targeted, stage-specific and evidence-based strategy is consequently essential if universal elementary enrolment is to be converted into equitable completion of quality secondary education.

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